

Tips in a Time of Economic Crisis

Managing Stress in Later Life



Eight in 10 of us say the economy is the biggest cause of our stress today. Living expenses keep rising, but our incomes are the same or lower. Many older adults living on fixed retirement incomes are feeling that stress more than most. In fact, a recent survey reveals that over 90 percent of older women report experiencing increased stress related to the economy.

Research shows that stress takes a greater toll on the minds and bodies of older adults than it does on others. The result? Declining health can catch older adults in a potentially overwhelming, sometimes lethal, cycle of stress over ill health, costs of care, and costs of living.

Older adults, perhaps more than any other group, need to know how to manage the growing stress of these difficult economic times.

Data Source: American Psychological Association, 2008.

Many Americans report heightened levels of stress during this time of financial crisis. Yet, few realize that this reaction to economic pressures closely resembles the psychological effects experienced after natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, or even the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Stress reduction and mental health promotion are as important now for people affected directly or indirectly by the financial crisis as for those who suffered from effects of natural or man-made disasters.

You Should Know

Nearly every day, whatever our age, we experience stress of some kind. Feelings of stress come from the reactions that our bodies have to challenges, pressures, and demands that are not a usual part of our daily lives. We may feel stress at the doctor's office, when taking a trip, or after missing a bus. That short-term stress makes us worry or feel anxious. And generally, it goes away. But we also may face more long-term stress from a lifetime of poverty or discrimination, an abrupt retirement, relocation from a longtime home, the death of a partner or other loved one, or a severe or chronic illness.

Among older adults, the impact of a lifetime of stress can deplete a person's physical and emotional resources. Over the course of many years, stress can become a contributing factor to such chronic health problems as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. It can also contribute to substance abuse, depression and other symptoms of mental illness, and even suicide.

Know the Signs of Stress

Stress may show itself in physical ways: muscle tension and pain, headaches, stomach upset, or rapid heartbeat. Some of us may overeat; some may feel tired. Stress also can affect us emotionally. Anxiety, the "jitters," and becoming short-tempered, forgetful, or unable to focus are all signs of stress.

It is important to understand that these feelings or experiences are not a normal part of growing older. We need to pay attention because they are signals our bodies are sending to warn us when stress is becoming significant. By paying attention to what our bodies are telling us, we can better manage our stress and reduce the serious effects that it has on older adults.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Center for Mental Health Services
www.samhsa.gov



Stress Reduction

Once we understand how we experience stress and how it affects the way we feel and act, we can take action to manage it in healthy ways, before we feel overwhelmed.

Pay attention to body and mind:

- Know your own stress signals and recognize the early signs of stress.
- Don't get caught in the "doom-and-gloom" cycle; work to stay positive. Know it's ok to feel stress, depression, guilt, and anger. Remember, too, that these emotions can be managed.
- Recall past solutions to similar problems and build on them.

Attend to your health:

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat healthy foods; drink water.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Don't use tobacco or illegal drugs.
- Get regular physical exercise.

Practice relaxation:

- Relax your body and mind. Use deep breathing, stretching, meditation, listening to music—whatever works.
- Pace yourself by alternating stressful tasks with pleasant activities.
- Take time to do nothing; just relax.

Set priorities:

- Make a list of things that need to be done.
- Identify how you will do each item on the list.
- Do the most important things first to help reduce stress.
- Do not be discouraged if goals can't be accomplished immediately.

Reach out for support:

- Talk with family and friends; share with them the situation, the challenges, and your feelings and worries.
- Share your concerns with individuals in similar situations; sharing ideas and solutions is a positive way to reduce stress.

Helpful Resources

SAMHSA's Health Information Network

Toll-free: 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727) (English and Español)
Web site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Services Locator

Toll-free: 800-789-2647 (English and Español)
Web site: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases>

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-free: 800-662-HELP (4357) (24/7 English and Español)
Web site: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-free: 800-273-TALK (8255)
TTY: 800-799-4TTY (4889)
Web site: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Workplace Helpline

Toll-free: 800-WORKPLACE (967-5752)
Web site: <http://www.workplace.samhsa.gov/helpline/helpline.htm>

Other Resources

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Medicare

Toll-free: 800-MEDICARE (633-4227) (English & Español)
Web site: <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/medicare.asp>

Medicaid

See State Government listings in your local phone book.
Web site: <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/medicaid.asp>

Social Security Administration

Toll-free: 800-772-1213 (English & Español)
TTY Toll-free: 800-325-0778
Web site: <http://www.socialsecurity.gov>

USA.gov: Personal Finance

Web site: www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Money/Personal_Finance.shtm

Note: This list is not exhaustive. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

ABOVE ALL: Know When To Get Help

Even when we do everything we can to reduce our stress, sometimes problems may become so overwhelming that we need to reach out to others for help. We shouldn't feel embarrassed to seek help if we haven't been able to overcome feelings of stress, depression, or anxiety on our own. And we shouldn't be afraid to help someone we care about do the same.

Talking helps. Reach out to partners, other family members, or close friends. Help can come from a faith community, your doctor, or a staff member at a senior health center. Referrals to mental health and substance abuse treatment professionals are readily available by contacting a local community mental health center or employee assistance program.

Most important, if you or a friend or family member is thinking about suicide, GET HELP immediately by calling 911 or 800-273-TALK.

